The Noble Quest

A Timeless Choice from the Buddha's Own Story

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All of Life is a Quest. The Buddha Taught There Are Only Two.

Mendicants, there are these two quests: the noble quest and the ignoble quest.

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The Ignoble Quest: Seeking What is Bound to Fade

It’s when someone who is themselves liable to be reborn, grow old, fall sick, die, sorrow, and become corrupted, seeks what is also liable to these things.

* Partners and children
* Male and female bondservants
* Goats and sheep, chickens and pigs
* Elephants and cattle
* Gold and currency

Someone who is tied, infatuated, and attached to such things... this is the ignoble quest.

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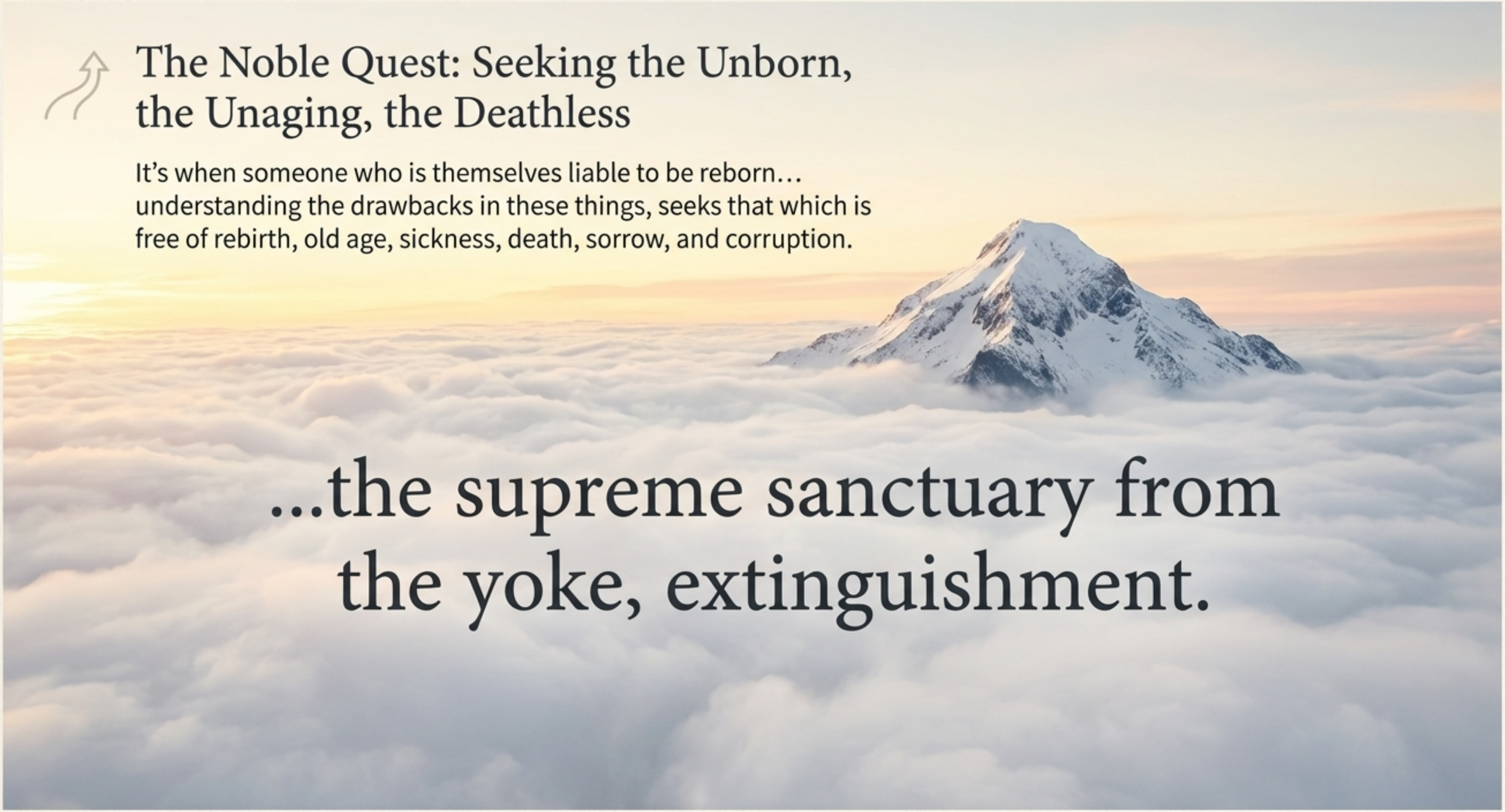
The Noble Quest: Seeking the Unborn, the Unaging, the Deathless

It’s when someone who is themselves liable to be reborn… understanding the drawbacks in these things, seeks that which is free of rebirth, old age, sickness, death, sorrow, and corruption.



…the supreme sanctuary from the yoke, extinguishment.

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The Buddha's Own Reckoning

Before my awakening… I too, being liable to be reborn, sought what is also liable to be reborn.

Then it occurred to me:

'Why do I, being liable to these things, seek things that have the same nature? Why don' t I seek that which is free of rebirth… the supreme sanctuary from the yoke, extinguishment?'

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The Great Departure

Some time later, while still with pristine black hair, blessed with youth, in the prime of life—though my mother and father wished otherwise, weeping with tearful faces—I shaved off my hair and beard, dressed in ocher robes, and went forth from the lay life to homelessness.

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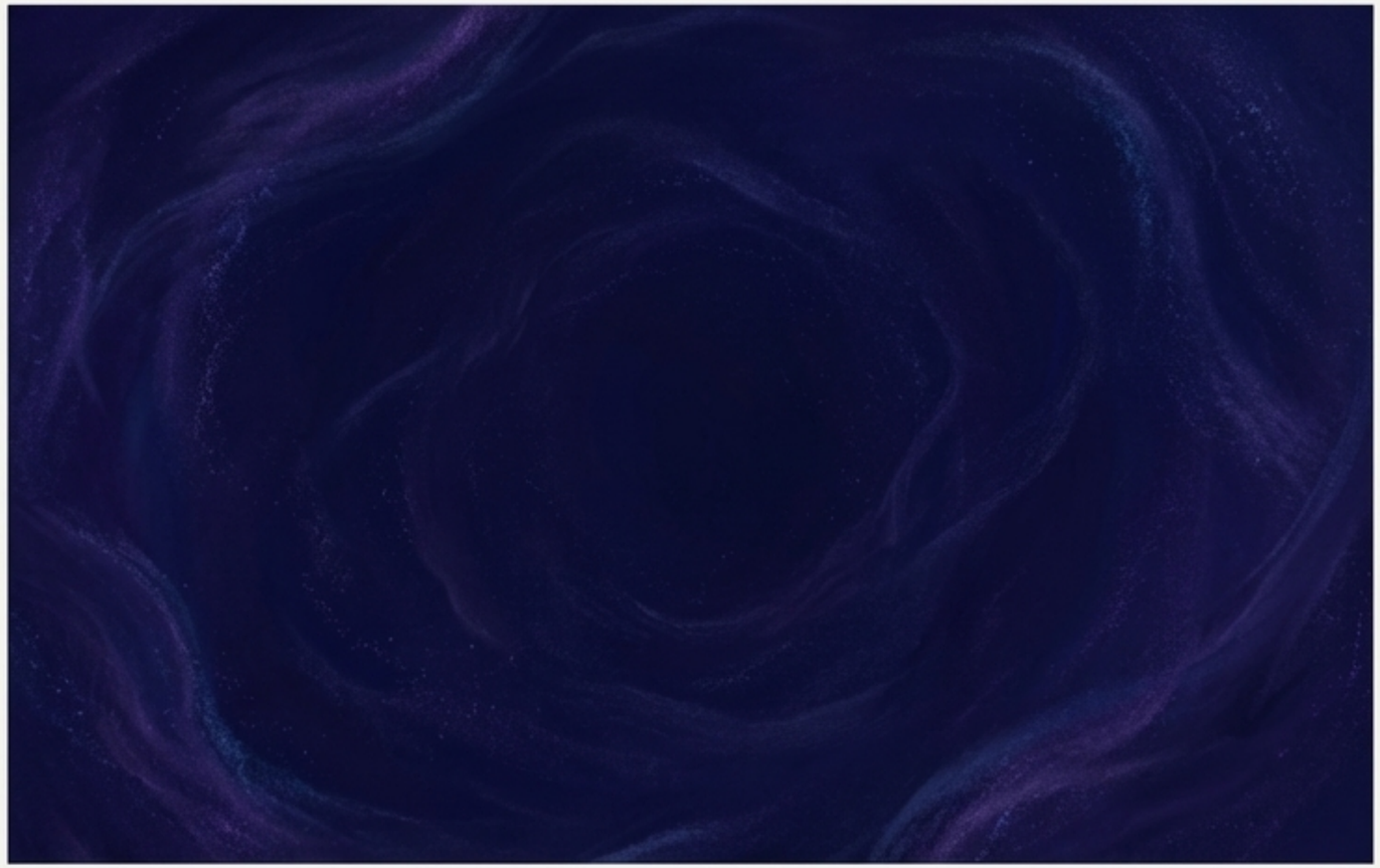
The First Teacher: Mastering the Dimension of Nothingness

1. Approach
He approaches Āḷāra Kālāma, seeking the “supreme state of sublime peace.”

2. Mastery
“I quickly realized that teaching with my own insight, and lived having achieved it.”

3. Recognition
His teacher places him “on the same position as him, and honored me with high praise,” offering him joint leadership of the community.



The Verdict
Then it occurred to me, ‘This teaching doesn’t lead to disillusionment, dispassion, cessation, peace, insight, awakening, and extinguishment. It only leads as far as rebirth in the dimension of nothingness.’

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A Noble Disappointment: The Search Continues

He then approaches his second teacher, Uddaka son of Rāma. He masters an even more refined state: the "dimension of neither perception nor non-perception."

Realizing that this teaching was inadequate, I left disappointed.

Again, he is honored and offered a high position. But his realization is the same: "This teaching doesn't lead to… extinguishment. Realizing that this teaching was inadequate, I left disappointed."

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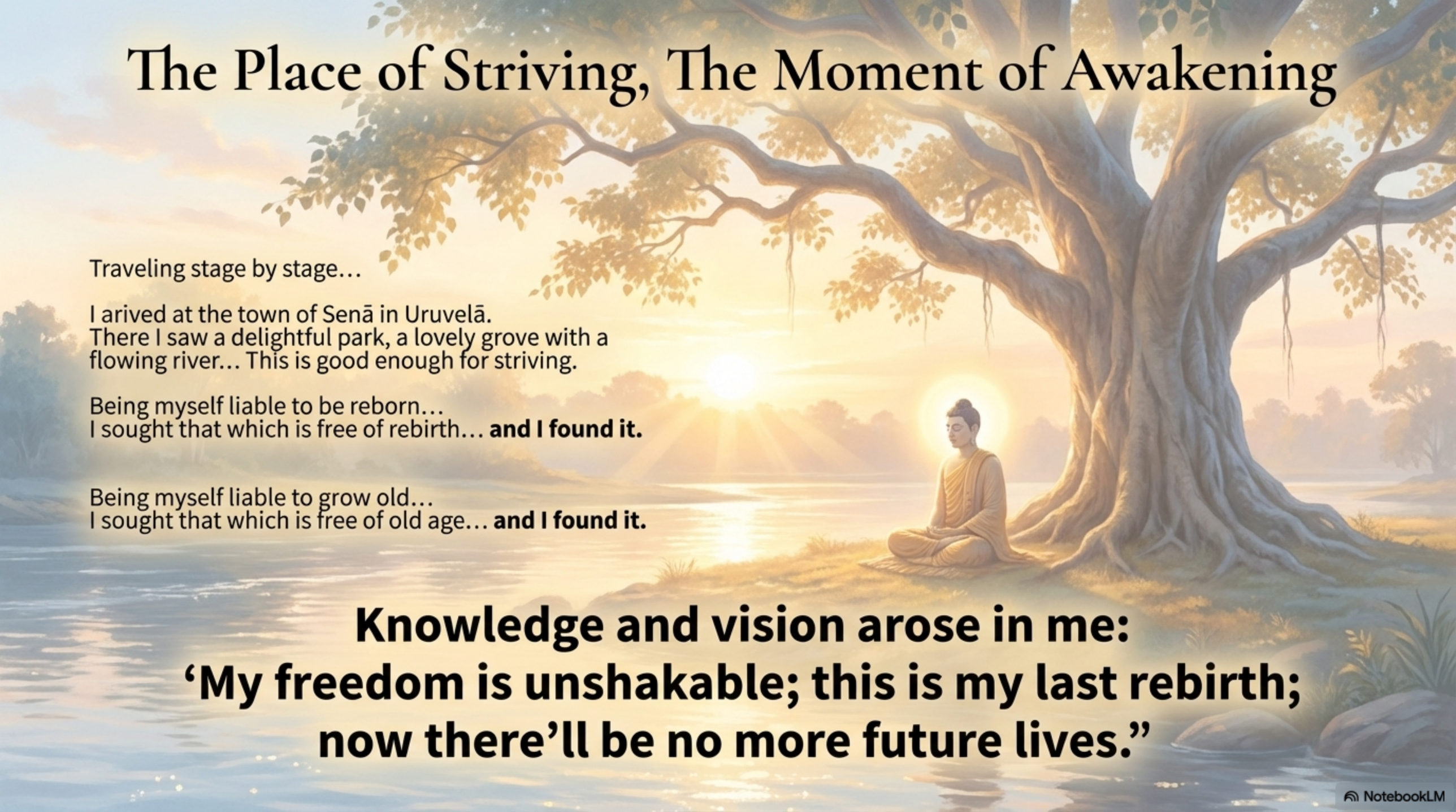
The Place of Striving, The Moment of Awakening



Traveling stage by stage…

I arived at the town of Senā in Uruvelā.
There I saw a delightful park, a lovely grove with a flowing river… This is good enough for striving.

Being myself liable to be reborn…
I sought that which is free of rebirth… **and I found it.**

Being myself liable to grow old…
I sought that which is free of old age… **and I found it.**

Knowledge and vision arose in me:
‘My freedom is unshakable; this is my last rebirth;
now there’ll be no more future lives.”

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A Truth Too Deep for the World?

The Buddha's Thought

"This principle I have discovered is deep, hard to see, hard to understand… sublime, beyond the scope of logic... And if I were to teach this principle, others might not understand me, which would be wearying and troublesome for me."

Verse of Hesitation

> 'I've struggled hard to realize this,
> enough with trying to explain it!
> Those mired in greed and hate
> can't really understand this teaching.'

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A Plea from the Heavens

The Intervention
The divinity Sahampati appears, fearing “the world will be lost,” and implores the Buddha to teach.

The Divine Request
“Sir, let the Blessed One teach the Dhamma! ...
... There are beings with little dust in their eyes. They’re in decline because they haven’t heard the teaching. There will be those who understand the teaching!”

The Buddha’s Vision
Moved by compassion, the Buddha surveys the world with his “eye of a Buddha.” He sees beings like lotuses lotuses in a pond...

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The Buddha's Response
He replies to Sahampati in verse: 'Let those with ears to hear commit to faith. Thinking it would be troublesome, Divinity, I did not teach the sophisticated, sublime Dhamma among mankind.'

The First Students
'He resolves to teach the five mendicants who had attended to him during his striving. He finds them in the deer park at Isipatana.'

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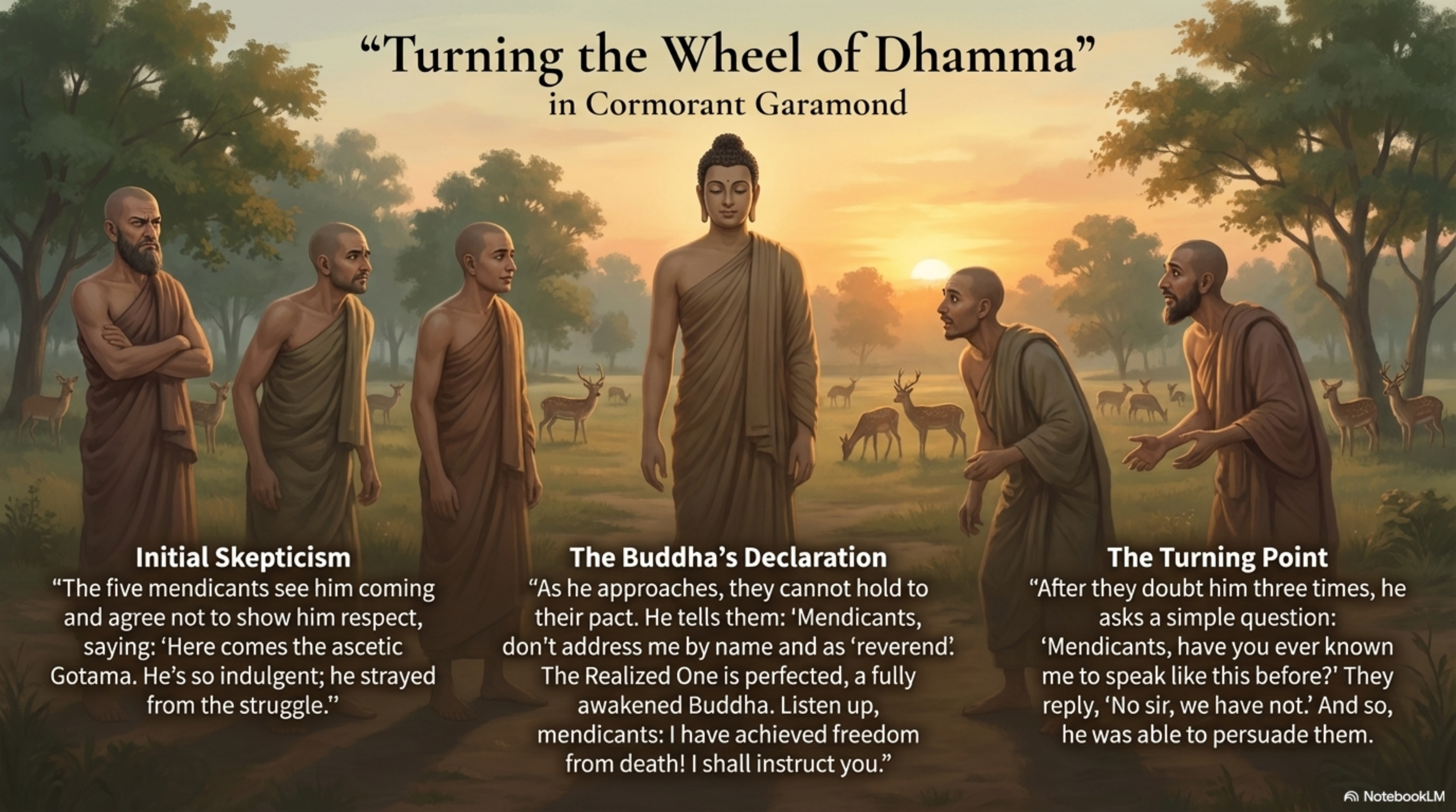
“Turning the Wheel of Dhamma”

in Cormorant Garamond



Initial Skepticism

“The five mendicants see him coming and agree not to show him respect, saying: ‘Here comes the ascetic Gotama. He’s so indulgent; he strayed from the struggle.’”

The Buddha’s Declaration

“As he approaches, they cannot hold to their pact. He tells them: ‘Mendicants, don’t address me by name and as ‘reverend.’ The Realized One is perfected, a fully awakened Buddha. Listen up, mendicants: I have achieved freedom from death! I shall instruct you.”

The Turning Point

“After they doubt him three times, he asks a simple question: ‘Mendicants, have you ever known me to speak like this before?’ They reply, ‘No sir, we have not.’ And so, he was able to persuade them.

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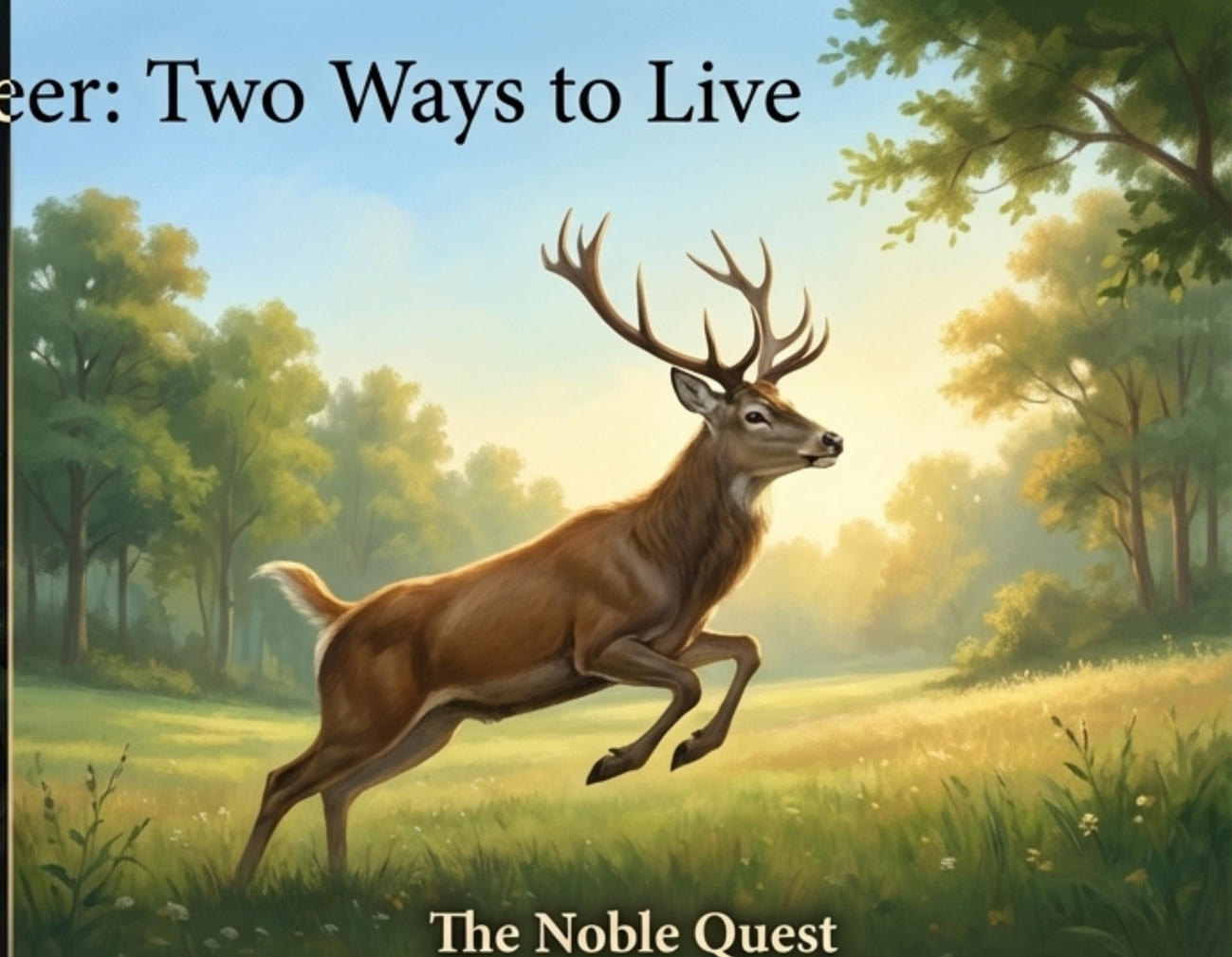
The Parable of the Deer: Two Ways to Live

The Ignoble Quest

"Suppose a deer in the wilderness was lying caught on a pile of snares… the hunter can do with them what he wants. And when the hunter comes, it cannot flee where it wants."

This is like those who are 'tied, infatuated, attached' to sensual pleasures, blind to the drawbacks. They are at the mercy of the Wicked One (Māra).



The Noble Quest

"Suppose a deer in the wilderness was lying on a pile of snares without being caught… when the hunter comes, it can flee where it wants."

This is like those who see the drawbacks of sensual pleasures and understand the escape. They have not met with calamity.

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The Path Beyond the Hunter's Reach

"A mendicant who masters this path is described as one who has 'blinded Māra, put out his eyes without a trace, and gone where the Wicked One cannot see.'"

6. **The End: The Cessation of Perception and Feeling**, where their defilements come to an end.

5. **Higher States: The Dimensions of Infinite Space, Infinite Consciousness, Nothingness, and Neither Perception nor Non-Perception**

4. **Fourth Absorption:** Pure equanimity and mindfulness, without pleasure or pain.

3. **Third Absorption:** Equanimity, mindful and aware

2. **Second Absorption:** Bliss born of immersion and internal clarity.

1. **First Absorption:** Seclusion from sensual pleasures

They've crossed over clinging to the world. And they walk, stand, sit, and lie down in confidence. Why is that? Because they're out of the Wicked One's range.

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